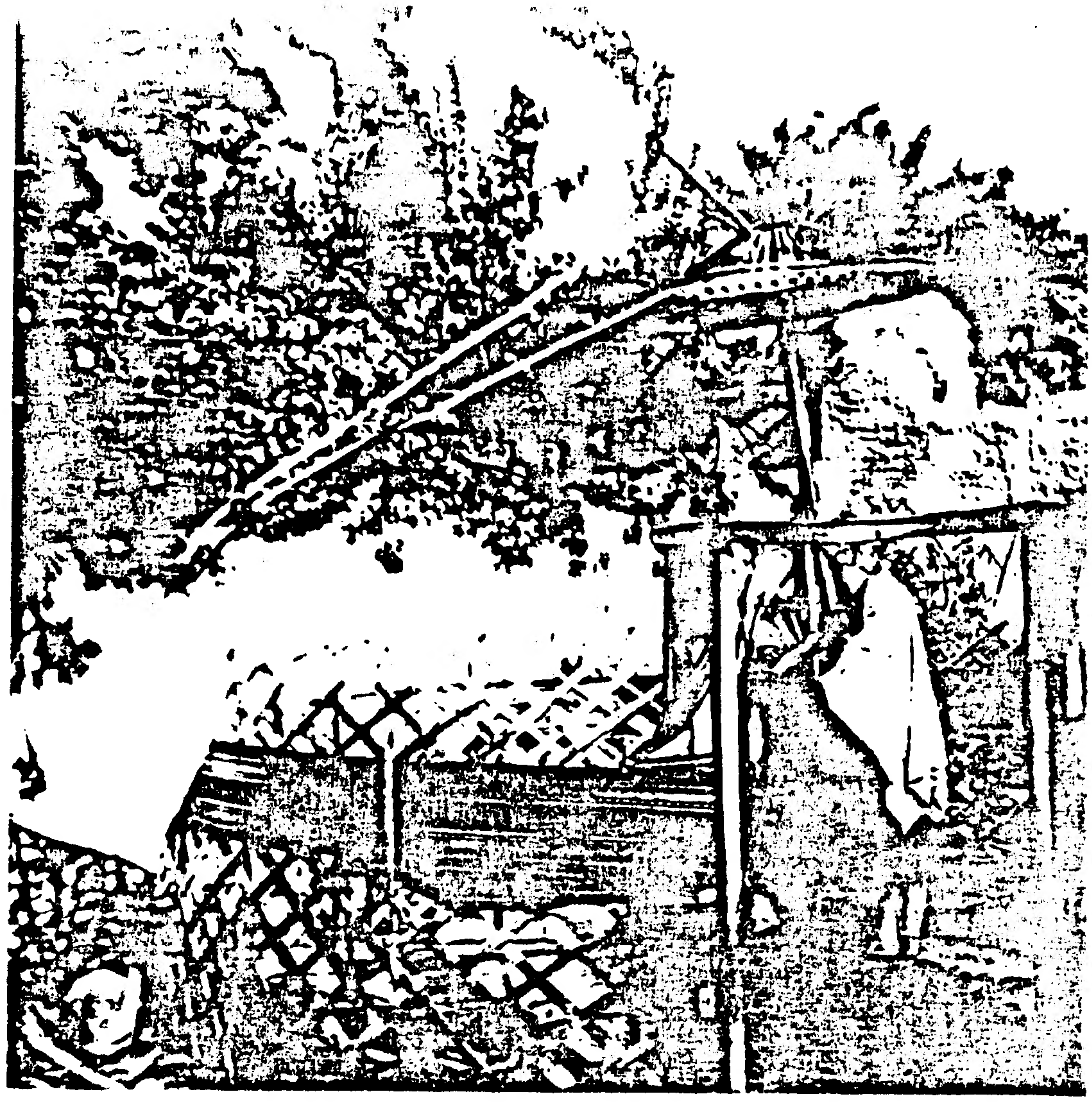
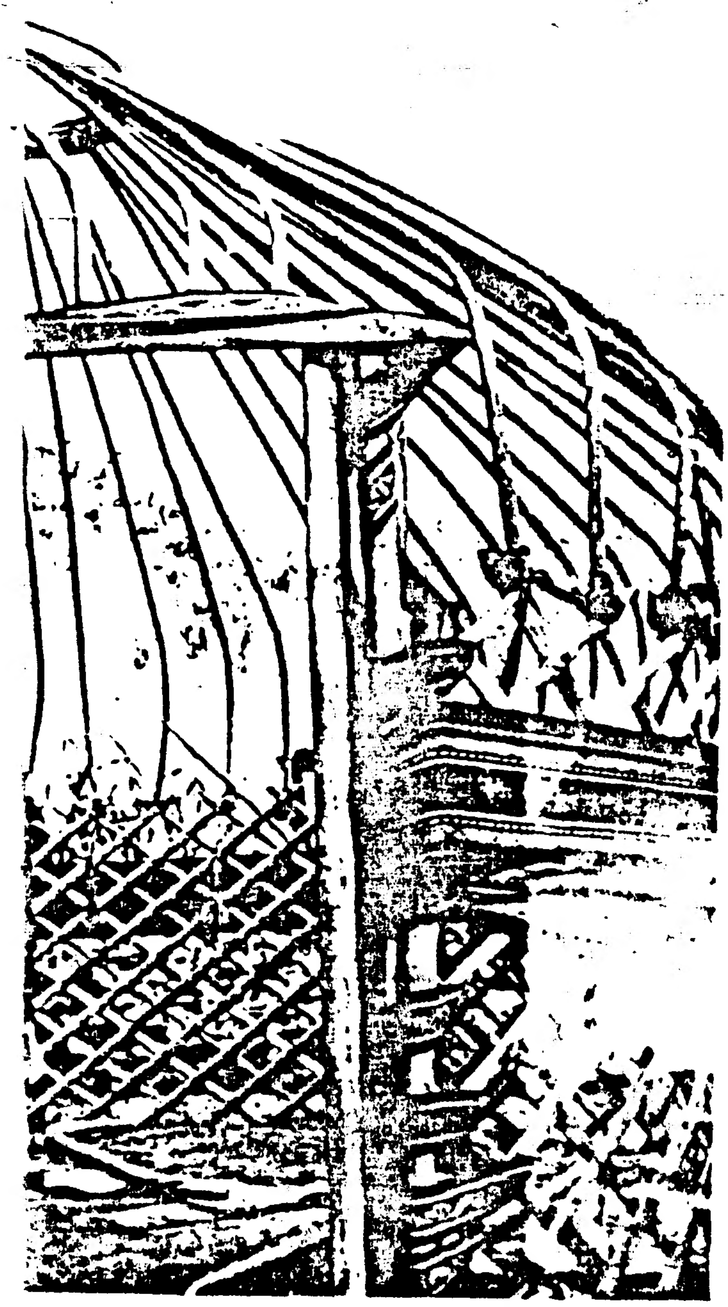
first sunk into two small holes in the olding lattice are then tied together and h narrow woolen bands. The size of the mber of sections used and how far they oolen band is wound tightly around the it.

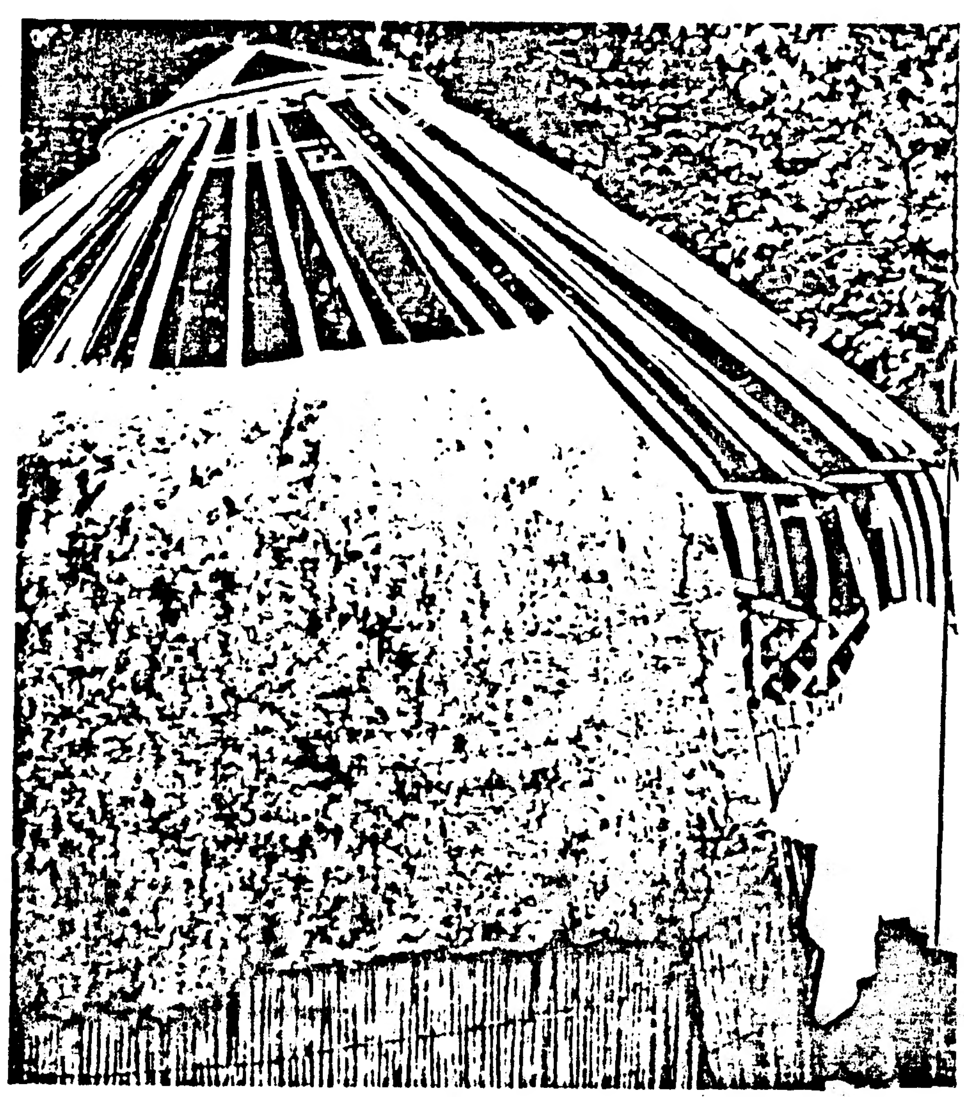
sed to the center of the yurt and held in poles. The roof-poles are fitted into d tied to the top of the lattice base with ool, which are left hanging down inside n, and to suspend items for storage. ands are also looped around the roof-

are placed outside the lattice base for f felt, cut to shape and bound, cover the heavy felt takes practice, dexterity, d tightly at the bottom edge of the felt ayer. The second overlapping felt layer oles. Wide bands sewn onto the edges he second layer into place. Pompoms the bands on the second layer to add



A white cover crowns the yurt. When yurts are used in winter this piece can be pushed back to allow smoke to escape; in the summer, outside kitchens are used. Wide bands of white cotton secured by looping them over the rope at the bottom of the first layer of felt batten down the roof. (Note that no reed matting covers the lattice to left. This side faced a private garden so the matting was left off to allow maximum ventilation; a house and another yurt stood to the right so matting was used for privacy.)





thereafter, the official betrothal ceremony, the *shirin-i-griftan* ("taking or eating sweets"), takes place. Traditionally, only the women attend the ceremony at the house of the bride's family. The women of the groom's family bring several dresses (at least four or five, a year's supply), some jewelry, and the three-piece silver lady's toilet set which includes tweezers, ear cleaner, and toothpick. If relatively well off, the groom's family may also present the engaged girl a silver necklace with fish pendants, ancient symbols of fertility. Another common folk symbol, the circle (related to the ancient sun or sunburst motif) guarantees the couple good luck.

At the *shirin-i-griftan*, close female relatives break the conical sugarloaf over the bride's head (to give her a sweet disposition?) with a ceremonial sugar axe, which usually is decorated with a stylized bird-of-life motif. (According to legend, the sun bird, omen of good fortune, brought divine nectar [*homa*] from heaven.) If the sugarloaf breaks into many fragments, the marriage will be long and happy. The bride's family uses the fractured cone to make the sherbet (*sharbat*) and sweet wheat pudding (*malida*) served at the wedding. The wedding sherbet is thick and colorless, flavored with rose water and containing black seeds (again a fertility symbol?) called *tokhm-i-riyan* or *tokhm-i-biryan*. The bride and groom feed each other bites of sherbet and *malida*, much as Western brides and grooms share the first slice of the wedding cake.

The *shirin-i-griftan* makes the engagement official, and, if the opportunity has not already occurred, gives the future in-laws a chance to get acquainted. At times, years pass between the formal engagement and the marriage, for one or more of the following reasons: the girl or the boy (or both) are considered too young; the family suffers some economic crises; the boy goes away for two years of military service, or to work seasonally on development or other projects. As the engaged girl waits, however, she must show respect at all times for her potential in-laws. At the approach of her future mother-in-law, a girl will cover her face, sit with her back to the crowd in a corner, or go outside the room.

The Wedding

The ideal time for marriage in Aq Kupruk is early fall (late September-October), after the completion of the wheat cycle.* Marriage is forbidden, however, between the two important religious festivals of Id-i-Qorban and Id-ul-Fitr, which follow the lunar calendar, occurring 11 days earlier each year. Traditionally the wedding (*arusi*) takes place over a three-day period. The father of the groom (and other close relatives) pays the bills, including payments to musicians, dancers (usually female impersonators), and singers. The families and their guests play chess, wrestle,

*During the severe droughts of 1970-71, only two marriages took place in Aq Kupruk, but six were planned for the fall of 1972 following a bumper harvest. None of the six marriages involved first cousins, and one bride was to be a second wife (*ambok*). (The *ambok* should have been the first wife of her fiancée, but her father's failure to raise enough money for the required wedding festivities postponed the marriage for so long that the boy married another girl. The *ambok* hopes to have a boy baby first, thus enhancing her position in the household.)

gamble with cards, and compete in shooting and other games, in between drinking tea and eating the specially prepared sweets.

On the first day, the bride's relatives dress in their most colorful finery and go to the groom's house to socialize. On the next day, the reverse occurs, and the groom, often on horseback with a highly decorated horseblanket and saddle, leads his kinsmen. At intervals, his kin fire weapons in the air to announce his coming. On both these days, the musicians entertain the men while the women entertain themselves, singing, dancing, and playing games in another house or area. Also on the second day, the women prepare the bride for her removal to the groom's home. Female relatives annoint her hair with perfume and tie it into braids, using cloth with the seven colors of the rainbow to guarantee good luck. Often women sing ribald songs, accompanied by a tambourine and hand clapping. The older women make obscene remarks; their vocabulary is as earthy and descriptive as that of their farmer or shopkeeper husbands.

In late afternoon of the third day, the procession winds its way to the groom's house. The veiled bride rides on a horse in front of the groom's, one of the few times she will ever be in front. After the wedding, the husband will ride, the wife will walk.*

Once inside the groom's house the wedding party feasts, men and women eating separately. The bantering with both bride and groom continue unmercifully.

The actual marriage ceremony takes place on the third night. A *mullah* performs the wedding, at which time, theoretically, the bride and groom see each other for the first time. They gaze at each other's image in the reflection of a hand-held mirror. The *mullah* intones the beautiful Koranic injunctions concerning marriage, and asks the boy if he will provide for his betrothed and make her happy. He answers yes. The girl will often, as custom dictates, hesitate several times before answering. A male relative then paints the groom's little finger with henna, and ties a piece of embroidered cloth around the same finger. The groom does the same for his bride.**

Two final ceremonies prepare the couple for their departure from the wedding party. Close relatives cover the bride with seven veils. The top veil has four objects tied in the corners: saffron, crystalline sugar, cloves, and a coin symbolizing, respectively, marital happiness, family prosperity, individual purity, and collective security. Four male relatives (all brothers if four are available) untie and remove the objects, then lower the seventh veil.

The bride's father (or oldest brother if father is dead; if neither father nor brothers available, an uncle, preferably paternal) performs the *kamarbandi*. He knots the seventh veil together with a green turban cloth (the parental turban, symbol of authority), and ties the connected lengths around his daughter's waist, releasing her to her husband.

*These days one often sees an Afghan woman with one or two babes in arms on a donkey along the road, with her husband walking alongside or leading. If both walk, she will remain several paces behind her husband. The origin of this custom is not so much to symbolize female inferiority as to protect her from the oncoming world.

**Few rural Afghans bother to register their marriages officially. The nearest *gazi* (government-trained, religious-cum-secular judge) to Aq Kupruk is at Sholgara.

is difficult to determine how much emarital sex occurs in rural Afghani- ın, although in Aq Kupruk it is com- on folklore that a bride who is not a rgin can bring a small, blood-filled, embraneous sheep-gut pouch to bed, conspicuously breaking it during the stractions of intercourse.

The couple retires to the groom's room or hut and the party continues without them. In some areas of Afghanistan, a girl's virginity must still be demonstrated on her wedding night, and female relatives of the groom examine the bedding for evidence.* If a girl is not a virgin, she could be killed by the groom and his relatives, and her family would have to give a sister as replacement. (If a girl dies after the *shirin-i-griftan*, her family may also have to produce a sister [or another female relative] as a replacement.)

Divorce

In spite of the time, energy, and money expended on betrothals and weddings, divorce for the male is relatively easy. According to traditions sanctioned by Islam, all he has to do is repeat three times, "I divorce thee" (*tu-ra talaq mekunam* or *ta talaqawan*), dropping a stone each time to emphasize the finality of the action. If the wife's family bargained well during the wedding negotiations, a sizable amount of the dowry—plus compensation—will be awarded the divorcee. In urban areas, many court cases relate to the settlement of divorce actions. The main causes for divorce are barrenness in the wife (or no sons produced, only daughters), a nagging or ill-tempered wife , or failure to transmit the dowry to the husband's household. Family and public pressures, plus individual pride, make divorce infrequent.

More commonly, a dissatisfied husband takes a second wife (*ambok*), sometimes with the first wife's approval. A man may also take a second wife to fulfill previous family commitments or to cement political alliances. Wealthy families sometimes become wealthier by linking in marriage. In addition, wealthy men have been known to *pay* other men to take unwanted sisters (often unattractive or overbearing) as *ambok*.

In Aq Kupruk, a man with more than one wife always provides each with separate quarters in keeping with the equal treatment injunction in the Koran. Relationships between plural wives need not necessarily be antagonistic, and many pairs jointly visit homes of friends and relatives and participate in sewing bees.

The Damoclean-threat that a husband may take a second wife serves to keep wives in line. Newly married, young wives without sons feel particularly vulnerable, for, if their husbands take *ambok*, their families lose prestige. The attitude of most first wives toward an *ambok* (who, after all, shares in the housework) can be best summarized with a laugh and a quote: "Well, if she is nice it's fun; if she's not, it's horrible!" Most *ambok* enter their new status with some trepidation, fearing the wrath of the first wife. Some obtain amulets (*taawiz*), especially dried hoopoe heads and wolf claws, to guarantee the continued love and attention of the husbands, as well as assuring the sweet temper of the first wife in order to maintain peace and happiness in the household.

iz died recently. Five of lied, two daughters and ll have six children who id sisters to me.

, they are a joy for this hould die they will wait world. In Heaven they r from the sacred pool ll stand at the doors of parents from it.

Kibrya's Mother

f one Uzbak family is usband had married rst two wives died in ee women collectively en, of which five sur- erty, three daughters

good to have lots of a sin to take medicine

Kibrya's Mother

mortality is high, with about 40 per cent dying before two years of age, mainly of chronic gastrointestinal diseases. Parents and relatives grieve when children die, but console themselves in the belief that children will prepare places for them in paradise. Maternal mortality is also high, chiefly from childbed fever, because few village midwives understand modern sanitary procedures.* Most rural women refuse to be helped in childbirth or even to be examined by outsiders, particularly male doctors. And even if the woman did consent to be examined, her husband would probably prohibit it.

Having produced several children, women in Aq Kupruk generally want access to birth control techniques and medicines, but add: "Don't tell my husband!" (On a few occasions, both husbands and wives have confided their desire for birth control information.) Women sometimes employ local, dangerous abortion techniques, using needles, various herbal concoctions, or physical force to end the pregnancy. In rural areas such as Aq Kupruk, folk and religious beliefs regarding family planning are inseparable. Other literate Afghans are more concerned with Islam's compatibility with various birth control methods: Traditionalists oppose birth control; Modernists favor at least certain techniques, particularly coitus interruptus.

Barrenness is a terrible social stigma, and childless women often seek amulets from *mullahs* to make them fertile and pester visiting foreigners for magic medicines which will cause impregnation. People in Aq Kupruk, like most Afghans, believe that a man can never be sterile; the female is always at fault. One nonplussed woman in Aq Kupruk, married a second time but with several children by her first husband, could not understand why she failed to have any by her second husband. Suggestions that he might be sterile were greeted with horrified disbelief.

After the birth of a child, women traditionally remain isolated for 40 days, the period of womb purification and readjustment. All birth fluids and the afterbirth, considered unclean, are buried unceremoniously. Only the wife's mother, midwife, and close female relatives visit a new mother. But even in Aq Kupruk, women with a more modern outlook violate this rule.

Widowhood

A young widow's lot is difficult. She may be given to a brother of her deceased husband (the levirate), possibly one much younger than herself. In many such situations, she will be a second wife. When no one wants the widow, as rarely happens, she will be sent back to her family, but her children remain with the husband's family. An elderly widow will probably be a grandmother and will live with—and be protected by—her sons. Elderly childless widows have the worst lot in the society, being reduced to live literally as beggars and village-supported charity cases.

A divorced woman returns to her home, but she must leave all her children behind with the husband. If she is breast-feeding an infant, she must send it to her husband as soon as the child has been weaned. A man may remarry immediately after the divorce, but the divorced woman must wait three months (the traditional period is 100 days, by which time a pregnancy would be evident). The child of this pregnancy also goes to the husband, whether or not he is the biological father.

A woman's family will help her obtain a divorce only under extreme conditions, such as a husband's sterility (seldom proved, however), excessive cruelty, or repeated, demonstrable adultery. (Stories about women who chose suicide to divorce are repeated in Aq Kupruk, but no one knew of an actual case.)

In contrast to the emphasis on premarital chastity, much extramarital activity occurs in rural Afghanistan, although heavy penalties result.* In former times, the couple could be stoned to death by the wife's husband and his relatives, but this tradition is gradually being replaced by divorce.

Given the prevalence of extramarital activities, it may seem surprising that few folktales denounce the practice. Most of the stories, especially those told by women, make the cuckolded male look silly—and do not condemn the act. Several reasons may account for this. For example, many folktales condemn cowardice in battle, for cowardice, a *public* act, disgraces the *group* as well as the individual. Adultery, a private act, endangers group equilibrium only when made public, when it disgraces the husband, and by extension, potentially violates the property rights of his younger brothers, because of the levirate. So all the husband's immediate kinsmen become involved in a matter of honor and property, and, since violence is always just beneath the surface of the rural Afghan community, there are frequent explosions.

The explanation may also rest on the simple biological fact that a woman always knows she is the mother of her children, but a man can never be really sure. In peasant-tribal societies with unsanctioned but widespread adultery, acknowledged fatherhood is more important than *biological* fatherhood. By refusing to admit the existence of adultery Afghan rural folk perpetuate the group. But it requires that women faithfully play their enforced public role as inferiors. (They do, in fact, have little free choice in any matter except in their choice of a lover or lovers and women are often the aggressors in clandestine affairs.)

Motherhood

Wives become pregnant as quickly and as often as their husbands can successfully impregnate them and only with the birth of a son does a wife finally attain the full status of woman. Infant

*Two cases occurred in Aq Kupruk in 1972, which illustrate the consequences of such extramarital affairs. The first involved a 24-year old Uzbak girl who left her husband (an Uzbak farmer of about 60) for a young Tajik man. The couple was not seen again but the old husband continued to visit the bazaar with the little boy his wife had borne five years prior, and asking: "Have you seen my wife? She hasn't come home, and our son needs her." Many in Aq Kupruk laughed at the innocence of the Uzbak man, and even doubted that he was the true father of the bewildered child who accompanied him.

The other case was a similar disappearance of a young wife (20) from an older husband (a Tajik farmer of 40), but this time the woman's body was found mutilated on the river bank at Sholgara the next day. The husband, though congenitally crippled in one leg, was arrested and beaten on the feet (bastinado) by the police. Rather than confessing, he claimed that a wealthy man had taken his wife by force. The victim's mother insisted that her daughter was killed by her husband — because she had not borne children — and cried for more punishment of the farmer. Young women made charms from a quilt which had covered the victim, to protect them from the same fate. But much of the village gossip after the event centered around the belief that the murdered girl had had several lovers, and that one became jealous enough to kill her.

Film Dialogue

My young son Hafiz died recently. Five of my children have died, two daughters and three sons. But I still have six children who are like brothers and sisters to me.

While children live, they are a joy for this world; and if any should die they will wait for us in the next world. In Heaven they will bring us water from the sacred pool . . . . And they will stand at the doors of hell to protect their parents from it.

Kibrya's Mother

*The experience of one Uzbak family is illustrative. The husband had married three times. His first two wives died in childbirth; the three women collectively produced 23 children, of which five survived to reach puberty, three daughters and two sons.

Film Dialogue

Our people say it is good to have lots of children and that it is a sin to take medicine against having them.

Kibrya's Mother

mortality is high, with about 40 per cent dying before two years of age, mainly of chronic gastrointestinal diseases. Parents and relatives grieve when children die, but console themselves in the belief that children will prepare places for them in paradise. Maternal mortality is also high, chiefly from childbed fever, because few village midwives understand modern sanitary procedures.* Most rural women refuse to be helped in childbirth or even to be examined by outsiders, particularly male doctors. And even if the woman did consent to be examined, her husband would probably prohibit it.

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A young widow with brothers living nearby is fortunate, for they can protect her interests, including preventing her from being forced into a marriage she objects to. As stated earlier, brother-sister relations are usually very close and intense. On several occasions in Aq Kupruk, wives fled home to their brothers for protection from irate, unreasonable husbands. One such husband tried to get the district governor to force his wife to return to his home, but the governor refused to intervene.

One particularly lovely widow (about 30 years old) with an eleven-year-old son was being sought after by several men. A wealthy landowner from Zari offered afghanis 100,000 (top price) to her and her brother if she would marry him. She refused, because she did not want to be an *ambok*. Several other men had tried to marry her, but she consistently refused because, each time, her son objected. The eleven-year-old son was already engaged to his mother's brother's two-year-old daughter, to save the widow from the responsibility for raising a high "bride-price" later. He looked on himself as head of the family, and did not want to despoil the memory of his father, dead only two years. The widow did want to remarry eventually, and in the meantime, her brother looked after her. She hoped that within another year her young son would become reconciled to a stepfather.

* * * * *

The women of Aq Kupruk have subordinate status in their world, but their lives are neither all drudgery nor lacking excitement. During the day in Aq Kupruk, the town, excepting the bazaar, belongs to the women. Little happens without their knowledge, abetted by an informal spy system operated by preteen boys and girls. At night, when weather permits, many women sleep on rooftops and few incidents escape their notice. Ladders in each compound permit easy access to neighboring compounds and narrow lanes connect more distant points. Women sometimes take short cuts, crawling under small canal bridges which lead into the compounds and surprising the hosts. Village architecture helps insure

Film Dialogue

What's a poor widow to do?
One man offered me $2,000. He was from Zari. But I said no.

Why should I embitter my life to become his second wife?

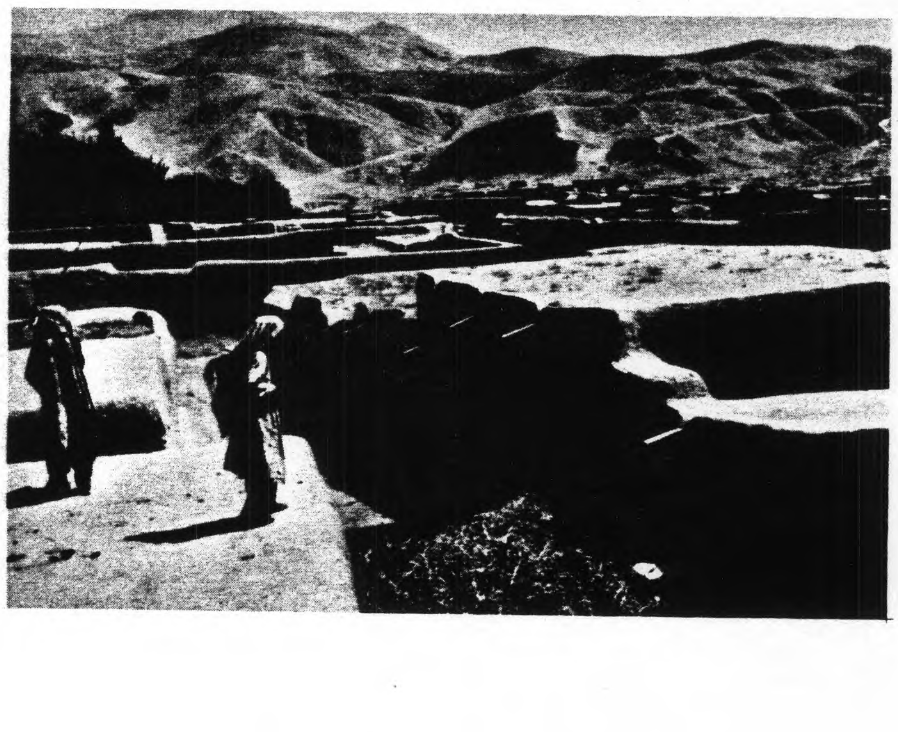
My heart is king and I am its minister; wherever it goes, I go.

Widow

FILM LINK



On the rooftops of Aq Kupruk



FILM LINK

the women's privacy: the more affluent households have high doors entering into a spacious courtyard, with a guesthouse to one side. Beyond this guest courtyard, and entered by another gate, another large courtyard unfolds, seen by few men outside the immediate family.

Some women in Aq Kupruk wear the sack-like *chadri* while visiting other women, but its use is limited to those few who have visited Mazar-i-Sharif, Shibarghan, or Kabul (mainly wives of officials). Saadat, Khoja, and Tajik women wear the *chadri*; rarely the Uzbak.

Most women wear a red-flowered or white shawl (*chadar*) which not only protects the hair from dust but also may be used for many other purposes: babies can be wrapped in its folds and fed in privacy; small items can be tied in the corners and transported; it can be worn comfortably in the fields while women work with men (the *chadri* cannot). Women wear colorful hats (*arachin*) distinctive in shape and design from the turban caps (*kolah*) of the men, underneath the *chadar* and the *chadri*. To remove the *arachin* in public is considered brazen, almost as bad as being seen with hair unbraided and flowing.

The women are in constant movement throughout the town during the day. Hands are never idle, busy with household chores or crafts as they socialize. And there are frequent special outings: to birth, wedding, and death ceremonies; to a friend's melon fields for a day's picnic; to nearby villages where they have close relatives and friends.

But the boredom, frustrations, and occasional mistreatment (particularly in urban areas) takes its psychological toll, and forms of hysteria (screaming, ripping off clothes in public, shouting obscenities, etc.) occur. Special shrines are devoted to the treatment and cure of such maladies.* The afflicted woman visits the shrine with close relatives and she generally responds quickly to the genuine concern of her family.

*Women often visit shrines, but seldom mosques. They pray, but seldom as a group.

In most families in Aq Kupruk, a warm, friendly—and often joking—relationship exists between man and wife. Together they play with the younger children and grandchildren as much as their chores will allow. They often insist on being photographed *en famille*. In addition, the entire family looks forward to the summer move to the *yilaq* to reap wheat and pick melons as a lark.

The women often amuse themselves by making fun of and mimicking the men. Although women are divorced from the man's world in public, often the men will discuss important political events with their wives before they take their opinions to the town council (*majlis*).

Film Dialogue

Last year we had many difficulties. Because of the drought food was scarce. We had to work very hard – but thanks to God and our king, this year has been good.

Kibrya's Mother

Only death eventually gives women equality. Although a separate ritual sees them to the burial ground, the low anonymous mounds in the cemeteries keep their secrets.

When I die do not weep for me.
Let no wailer follow my bier.
Only put dust on my grave,
since my right side deserves no more
dust than my left.
Put neither wooden nor stone signs
Upon my grave.
When you have buried me
sit on my grave for the time
that the slaughter of a camel and
the distribution of its meat would take—
so that I may enjoy your company for a little while.*

* Modified after the translation of the last will of Amr bin al-As, by I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. by S.M. Stern, George Allen, and Unwin, 1967, p.232. Amr bin al-As was a contemporary of the Prophet Mohammad and noted as the conqueror of Egypt.

[Photos courtesy Louis Dupree, Nancy Hatch Dupree, Josephine Powell]

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Spinning wool with spindle whorl.

AFGHAN WOMEN

by LOUIS DUPREE

NANCY HATCH DUPREE



Kibrya's mother spinning wool.

Women in northern Afghanistan are discriminated against from birth. In male-dominated Aq Kupruk society, women nevertheless manage to achieve positions of social and economic power, and behind the mud curtain, influence local political decisions. Village women usually control the sale of home industry products, and in the urban areas, women often make economic decisions, such as whether or not to rent a house owned by the family, and how much rent to charge.

The Traditional View

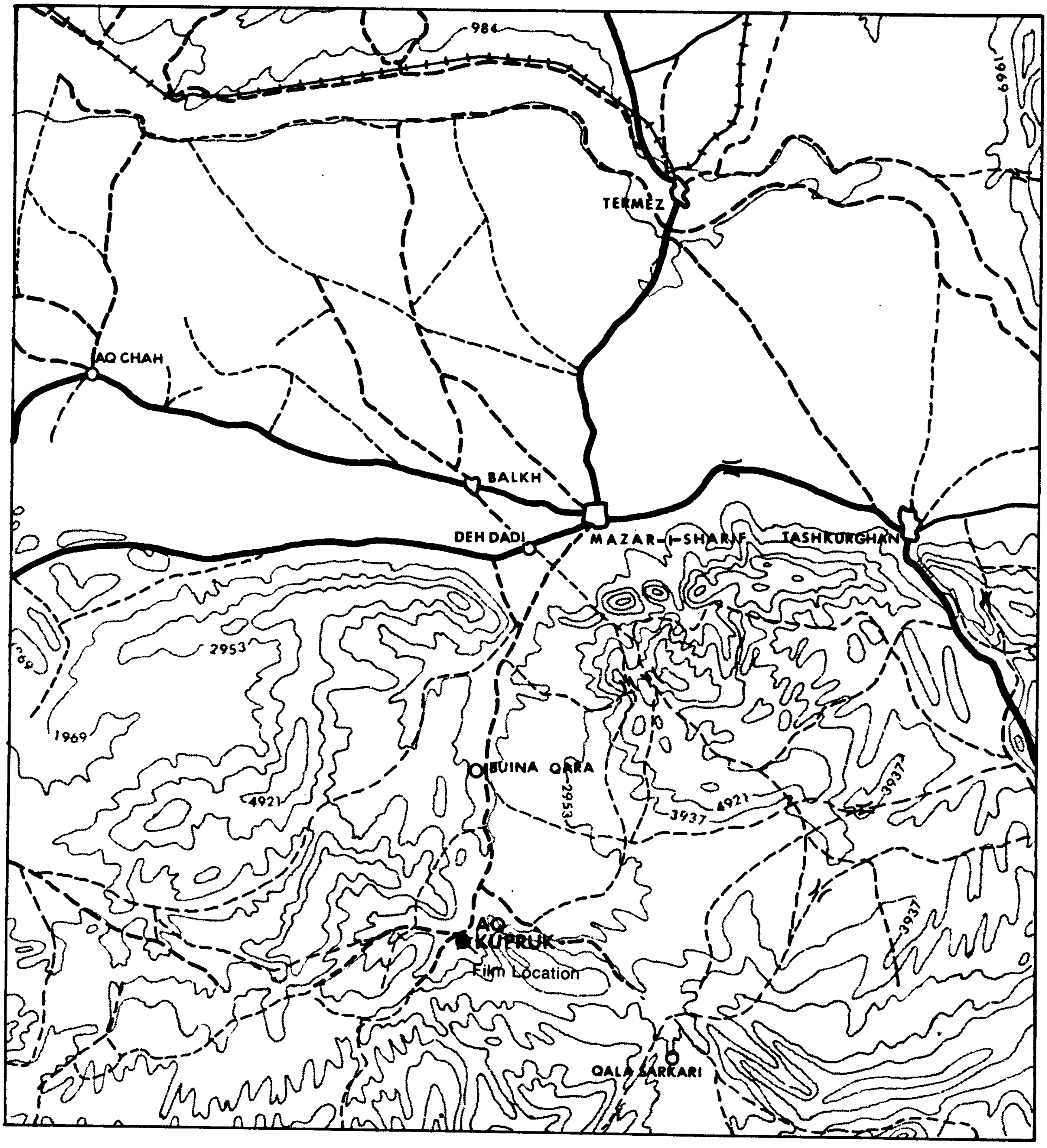
Afghan society is often described as patriarchal (authority vested in hands of the oldest males), patrilineal (inheritance of property and status through the male line), and patrilocal (women move to husband's place of residence). In-group and in-village marriages dominate, however, so a woman is seldom far from her family and is often close kin to her husband.

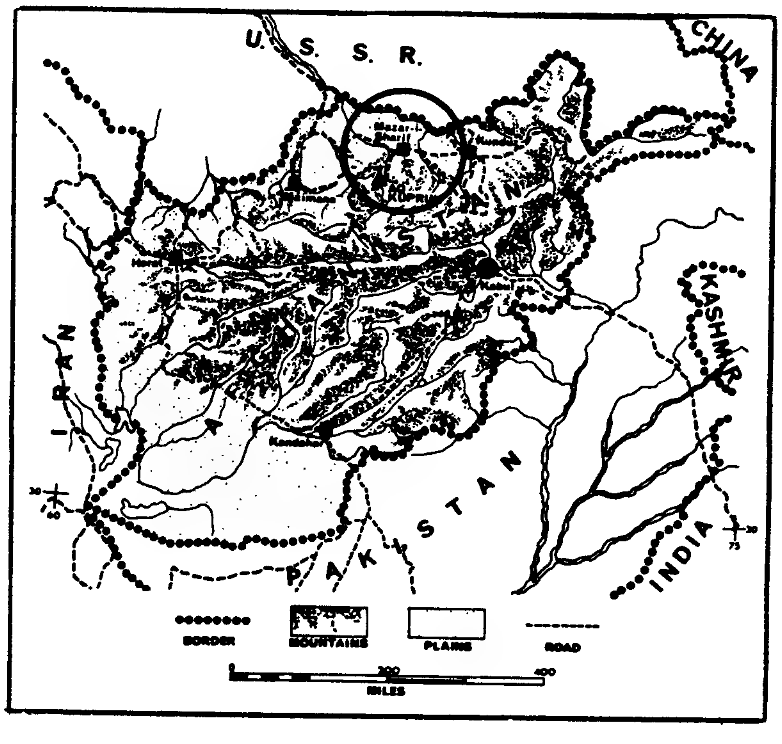
Various terms are used to describe a woman's pilgrimage through life. She is first called by a nickname until she can walk; then called "girl" (*angeli*) until puberty; before marriage she is called "eligible"; after marriage, "wife." Only when she has a son is she called "woman," for then she has performed the highest duty—perpetuated the male line. At menopause, she is referred to as a "respected old woman." Seldom will anyone refer to a woman by her given name, and she becomes embarrassed when asked what it is. Instead, women are often called "mother-of-so-and-so" (*madar-i-Ghufran*, Ghufran being the oldest or only son). If a woman has a daughter and no sons, she will be called after the daughter (*madar-i-Satana*). A girl can be called by her given name until marriage, after which she becomes "wife-of-so-and-so" (*khatun-i-Sufi Sahib*) until a child is born.

Women in Islam

According to conservative Traditionalist interpretations, Islam theoretically places women in an inferior position to men. They often quote the following Koranic injunction to justify their position:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women
for that God has preferred in bounty
one of them over another, and for that
they have expended of their property.


984
1969
TERMEZ
AQ CHAH
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MAZAR-I-SHARIF
TASHKURGHAN
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QALA SARKARI


U. S. S. R.
CHINA
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MOUNTAINS
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MILES

The AUFS Documentary Film Program

The 25 color films in the *Faces of Change* series were produced by the AUFS with support from the National Science Foundation. Five identical themes — rural society, education/socialization, the rural economy, the role of women, and political/religious beliefs — were explored in each of five ecological settings: Bolivia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Taiwan, and the Soko Islands off the China Coast.

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Bridget Reiss } Film editing "Afghan Women"

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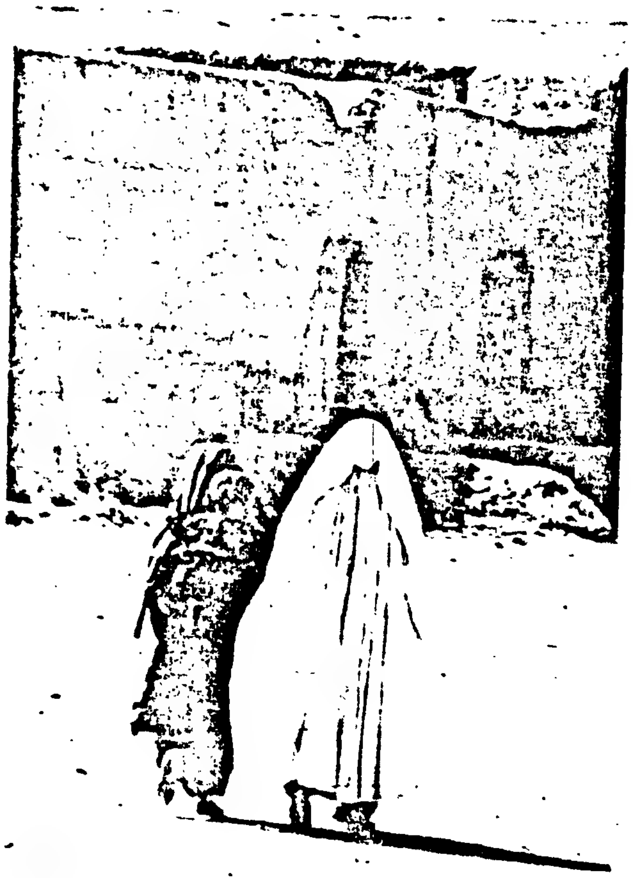
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*Sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, used to rationalize or justify beliefs and actions concerning Muslim institutions (Dupree, 1973: 100-101). Later *tafsir* (Commentaries or interpretations), often influenced by non-Muslim, medieval European concepts concerning the role of women, distorted the original ideals.



Vomen wearing chadri.

**"What your right hands own" refers to slaves (i.e., concubines): (Roberts, 1971:7-17).

Righteous women are therefore obedient,
guarding the secret of God's guarding.
And those you fear may be rebellious.
Admonish; banish them to their couches,
and beat them. If they then obey you,
look not for any way against them.
(Arberry, 1964: Sura IV, called *Women:* 77-78)

Modernists insist that there is no support in the Koran, the Hadiths,* or Sharia Law for the theory that the low status of Moslem women is to be laid at the doors of Islam, but lies instead with older cultural practices of southern and western Asia. In Islam's early years, moreover, women played important roles. The Prophet Mohammad as a young man married an older woman, Khadija, an important figure in the caravan trade between the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant Coast. She bore him four daughters and an unknown number of sons, all of whom died in infancy. One daughter, Fatima, married Ali, cousin of Mohammad, and constantly accompanied her father and husband during the fights between Mecca and Medina. Other young females bared their breasts during war dances to inflame Muslim warriors to deeds of valor.

The concept of the veil and purdah (isolation of women), which have become hallmarks of a Muslim woman's low status, came originally from the Christian Byzantine Empire of Anatolia and the Sasanian Zoroastrians of Persia. The harem concept too was of urban origin, foreign to the stringent codes of tribal, pre-Islamic Arabia. But the conquering Muslim Arabs became urbanized and were in turn conquered culturally, and under the Ottoman Empire the institution of the harem was carried to its zenith.

Islam permits a man four wives (and all the concubines he can support) under specific conditions: he must treat all wives *equally*:

. . . marry such women as seem good to you,
two, three, four, but if you fear
you will not be equitable, then only one,
or what your right hands own;**
so it is likelier you will not be partial.
(Arberry, 1964: 72. Sura IV: 3)

Few rural Afghans, however, can afford more than one wife: in 1972 less than 15 per cent of the marriages in Aq Kupruk were polygynous, and no man had more than two living wives. Polygyny is expensive and while husbands often threaten to take a second wife, they do so infrequently unless the first wife has failed to bear children. Of the few polygynous marriages in Aq Kupruk, a majority were Uzbak, possibly because Uzbak men quickly absorbed Uzbak widows into close-kin households. Being a minority in Aq Kupruk, the Uzbak have a limited choice of mates and a consequent desire to retain all the females within their own ethnic group.

Saadat men will marry only Saadat women; Khoja marry either Khoja or Tajik; Tajik may marry Khoja, Tajik, or Uzbak women; Uzbak will marry Uzbak women locally, but may take Tajik wives from another village. Intermarriage is increasing, although no one in Aq Kupruk would marry a Moghol or Hazara.

Women living in Aq Kupruk generally look down on women living in small settlements (*qishlaq*) in the hills, although many *qishlaq* families have superior wealth. The Aq Kupruk women also snub women brought in as wives from the outside. Exceptions exist, and one imported wife from Maimana was accepted, grudgingly, because of her forceful personality. The wives of local government officials—outsiders all—constitute a breed apart. They look down on the local women as "country"; the women of Aq Kupruk returned the compliment, considering the outsiders as debauched "Kabulis."

Women of one household in Aq Kupruk on their way to visit another.



The Urban-Rural Dichotomy

Beliefs and practices concerning the role and status of women differ considerably between literate and nonliterate segments of the population in what is basically an urban-rural split. In urban Afghanistan, which is also a more secular society, Modernists believe women should not be kept in purdah nor wear veils in public, and should receive equal educational and job opportunities. Traditionalists believe women should have only the most rudimentary education, practice purdah, and in public wear the *chadri*, a head-to-toe sack-like garment with latticework embroidery over the eyes.

Several gradations exist between the two extremes. Some of the better educated, upper class families retain extremely conservative views concerning the status of women. They may permit their women to appear in public unveiled and even let them work outside the home in offices, but the older members of the family choose mates for the daughters and sisters. The political, social, and financial implications of upper class urban marriages are still too important to be entrusted to the young.

Young girls often voluntarily put on the *chadri*, at least initially, for it symbolizes their flowering womanhood; i.e., the beginning of menstruation, and advertises their availability for marriage—physically, if not mentally. In rural areas especially, the use of the veil has become associated with social status, as only the wealthier husbands could originally afford to keep their wives isolated from work and economic relationships with outsiders. Even where the practice has been abandoned by upper class and educated women in the cities, it has spread dramatically in the countryside as lower class groups have belatedly copied the styles of the elite.



Efforts by Afghanistan's governments to modernize conditions for women have had mixed success. Beginning in 1959, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud (1953-1963, and again Prime Minister and President since July 1973) and with the sanction of the deposed king, Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973), women began to emerge informally from their centuries-old isolation. Larger numbers attend Afghan and other universities each year. Afghanistan has had two women cabinet members and women now work in private offices and have appointments in every branch of government (including the armed forces and police). Still, family pressures prevent most women from completely abandoning tradition and the assumed religious sanctions for purdah. Planned marriages remain the rule, although more and more young people try to seek mates of their own choosing, finding arranged marriages incompatible with the Marriage Law of 1967 and the announced ideals of the new Republic of Afghanistan. Some young men and women have recently gone to court to protest parental wedding arrangements made without their assent.

The conflict women experience is a part of larger changes. Kabul is in a state of constant confrontation, sometimes subtly and intellectually, other times violently. Conservative *mullahs* (local, often poorly educated, religious leaders) staged month-long demonstrations in April-May 1970, for example, attempting to force the government to reverse several policies that contradicted strict Muslim practice. They unsuccessfully demanded the compulsory return of women to purdah and the veil, and abolition of secular education for women. In separate incidents, ultraconservative *mullahs* have been arrested and severely punished for attacking city women with acid and even small caliber pistols. Their apparent motive was to check the wearing of miniskirts, other Western clothing, and makeup, but huge counterprotests by emancipated women in Kabul indicated that the *mullahs* had inadvertently *strengthened* the movement toward women's rights, at least in the cities.

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but not for girls.

Kibrya's Mother

The Rural Milieu: Aq Kupruk

Rural women, like those in Aq Kupruk, are largely unaffected by such urban conflicts over the degree of emancipation of women. In spite of the many strictures, they live relatively freer lives than many of their urban sisters—and the nomad women of the *maldar* are the freest, but hardest working, of all. While rural women have almost no experience outside the domestic world, they are recognized and respected for the work they can and must perform. Yet many urban Afghan women, whether in purdah or not, are semi-educated and have little to do. They often while away their time in gambling, listening to the radio, or reading pulp novels from Iran. They are truly culturally disoriented creatures in Afghan society, with little status, and only the role of mother ascribed to them.

The birth of a girl goes relatively unheralded in rural Afghanistan. While deliberate female infanticide rarely occurs, in the past unwanted girl babies reportedly died from calculated neglect, particularly in cases of extremely large families, and especially in urban areas. Men desire sons more than daughters, for sons increase political power, economic well being, and secure perpetuation of the family through the male line. The more sons, the more labor for the fields, the more fields which can be bought or rented, the more crops sold, the more money earned. (Personal wealth, not only in land and livestock but also in the form of hard cash, increasingly forms the real basis for prestige and political power in much of rural Afghanistan.)

Mothers, grandmothers, and maternal and paternal aunts supervise the socialization processes of all chidren until about the age of nine years. But very little formal, structured training takes place during this period. In general, a girl learns by doing, taking care of babies, collecting dung for fuel, and helping with ordinary household chores. Her closest male friends are her brothers, particularly her eldest brothers. Terms of endearment among them—for example, *lala* for eldest brother—may be used throughout their lives. Boys and girls mix freely, working and playing together until the girls reach puberty.

Between the ages of nine and 15, and especially from about age 13, a young girl begins to learn how to be a cook, laundrywoman, tailor, embroiderer, and mother. A girl will also be expected to work in the fields from time to time, especially during harvests. By the time most girls reach puberty, they are ready to perform responsibly in the household and to marry, although generally marriage does not occur until the girl reaches 15 or 16.

Daughters can be married into other locally wealthy families and their potential "bride price"* an economic exchange as well as a political alliance, is a consideration throughout the girl's upbringing. It is in urban areas that the concept of "bride price" is most liable to distortion, for it is more frequent that the element of reciprocity is absent. A wealthy khan, local leader, or an outsider, may purchase outright the beautiful daughter of a destitute peasant farmer. Such transactions, though less common than in the past, give the concept of "bride price" its bad connotation.

The dowry brought by the bride to her husband's home at least equals the bride price and includes clothing, bedding, and household utensils. The dowry is expected to last the couple about 15 years.

Many women in Aq Kupruk insist that dowries are commonly *double* the bride price. It takes years for a young girl to complete her dowry, its preparation occupying most of her time and energy. Since the majority do not attend school and have no opportunities for professional training, their entire early socialization points toward marriage.



Film Dialogue.

Payment for the bride varies.
For a young girl they give $1,000 or $500. Bibi Zainab's daughter, for instance, received $1,000 but if the bridegroom is poor he may pay much less.

A widow may receive $100 to $400. Of course, if a widow is beautiful, she may receive more.

Widow

*The English term bride price (*shir baha* in Dari, *wulwar* in Pashto) gives the wrong impression, for what actually occurs is a two-way exchange of material wealth. The money and/or livestock given to the family of the bride compensates for the lost of an economically valuable asset: the working girl in hut and field. The bride price varies considerably from area to area. In Aq Kupruk, the average fluctuates around afghanis 20,000 (in 1972, about afs. 90 = US$1). For the daughter of a local leader, the bride price would be between afs. 50,000 and 100,000.

Film Dialogue

Before a wedding we must make many things. It takes 2 or 3 years to get everything ready. We do a little bit at a time – and make ready all that we can afford. But it is pleasant work for we work together.

Kibrya

FILM LINK



Tassels for a dowry.

FILM LINK

Kin-related girls often hold round robin "sewing bees," especially at the end of the summer, which also ends the agricultural cycle. Food is served, tea drunk, gossip spread, and news collected. Generally the girls will work jointly on embroidered wall hangings, with each girl assigned a section. Up to 15 girls can work in this manner. The large rectangular hanging will be used as decoration and, at times, as a canopy or curtain for the bridal bed (or pallet) to insure a modicum of privacy. Others sew clothing or embroider turban caps for men's and ladies' hats, tea tray covers, pillow cases for the large pillows against which guests recline, small handkerchiefs, and larger handkerchiefs (*dastmal*) worn by men as cummerbunds for *Jeshn*, the National Holiday, or at weddings and other festivals.

The girls embroider with silk thread on cotton. They spend much time in spinning the silk, and decisions on designs involve protracted discussion as to how much silk will be required and what colors to use. Specialists draw the designs on cloth with a quill using ordinary ink; there are two designers in Aq Kupruk. Local bazaar shopkeepers import dyes from France, India, and Pakistan, although one yellow dye is made from a local hillside plant called *esparak*.

Married female relatives pitch in and help sisters, daughters, cousins, and friends accumulate the dowry. They particularly help with the spinning. Women in Aq Kupruk constantly visit one another, and *always* bring work with them, usually silk and wool to spin. In addition to the embroidery, women and girls make many items out of patchwork, which is also a reliable subject of conversation: visitors may spend hours discussing the origin of each piece of cloth—wedding dresses, children's clothing, a husband's turban cloth.

The hand-operated sewing machine (largely imported from India) has greatly speeded up home production of women's hats, children's vests, and swaddling bands. Unfortunately, a deterioration in folk art has also followed the machines. Yet fierce competition for praise of their handiwork exists among the women. They are proud of work well done and criticize each other's work as they go for water in the canal or river, or do their laundry, beating the clothes on stones.

Most weaving in Aq Kupruk is done by Uzbak women or the women of mixed Tajik-Uzbak families. Women from other families pay these part-time specialists to weave specific items, and also furnish the spun wool. The Saadat, Khoja, and Tajik women spin two types of wool skeins. The fine skeins are used for *dastakan* (the large, rectangular cloth which is spread on the floor for eating) and *burjama* (large squares, green with dark red stripes, used to wrap and store pallets and pillows to protect them from the dust). The thicker threads go into such items as *gelims* (flat-weave), donkey and horse-feeding bags, *kharjin* (saddle bags), bags for transporting grains and other produce, *bildow* (yurt belts), and other yurt accoutrements.



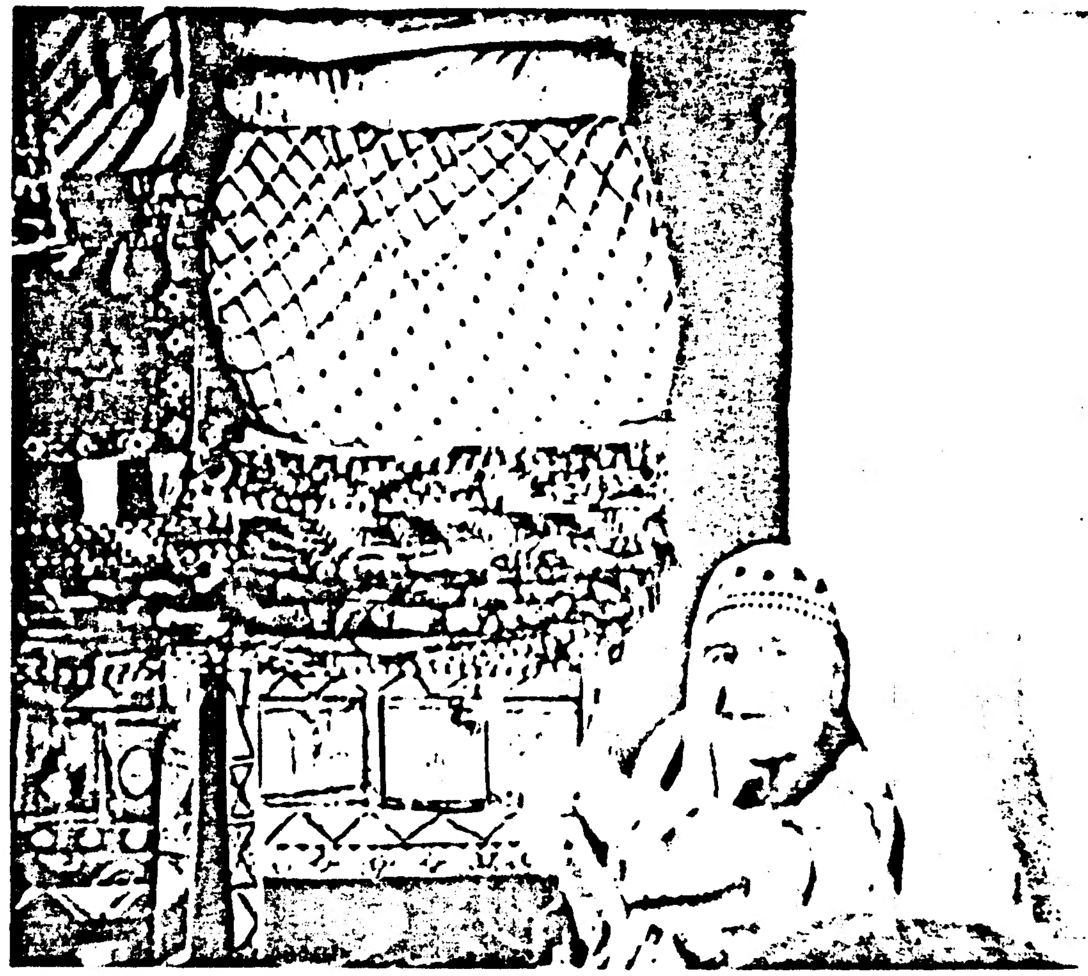




Rural Women at Work. Young girl (above left) begins training early for her role as mother, while an adolescent (above right) can already bake bread and tend to meals. Women of all ages work together at household tasks such as laundry (lower left), grinding grain into flour (right), and sewing (opposite). Older women are usually freed from the more rigorous tasks, although the grandmother (opposite right) probably had a role in preparing the assembled dowry items.







Typical Items Included in Dowry

40* trouser drawstrings
30* turban caps
40* heavily embroidered handkerchiefs

5 elaborately embroidered squares (*dastmal*) worm as cummerbunds by men, shawls by women, or as wrapping for the Koran
2 woven rugs
2 felt rugs
2 large woven-wool squares (*borjama*) for storing pallets and pillows
2 carpet bags for storing clothing (*mafraj*)
4 finely woven rectangular wool cloths spread on floor when eating (*dastakan*)
10 embroidered wall hangings
10 patchwork wall hangings
2 tray covers
4 pillow covers
- small embroidered squares
2 padded sleeves to protect arm when baking bread.
4 padded quilts
4 pallets stuffed with fluffed cotton
2 decorative bands wound around the inside of the yurt, at top of lattice base; woven of wool
2 extremely long bands of patchwork hung below ceiling around entire inside of main living room
3 yurt belts, wider than the inside decorative band, wound tightly around outside of lattice base to stabilize dwelling; woven of wool.
- small bags to protect mirrors, wooden spoons in kitchen, etc., from dust; woven of wool
2 decorated fans
- clothing
- jewelry, particularly glass bead necklaces, colored plastic hairpins, plastic bracelets, silver earrings, silver *taawiz* (amulet) holders
6 teapots
12 cups, saucers, plates
1 tray
4 service platters
6 serving dishes
1 brass water pot
- kitchen utensils
1 kerosene lantern
2 wooden chests
3 tin boxes

*Each male member of the family attending the marriage ceremonies receives one of these items, accounting for the large number each girl must make for her wedding.

Felt items (yurt covers, rugs) are also important for the dowry. Drawstrings for the wide-waisted pants worn by both men and women are finger-woven and have elaborate tassels of many colored braids and tufts. These tassels are one of the first items young girls learn to make.

Girls store their dowry clothing and the smaller embroidered items in carpet bags and painted wooden boxes. The more affluent now use painted tin trunks from Mazar-i-Sharif. Elaborately decorated chests hold teapots, cups, saucers, and other dinnerware. The *burjama*, tied with colorful tasseled bands which hang down the sides for added decoration, are piled on top of the wooden chests.

Film Dialogue

It takes five or six days to make a felt rug. After we pound the wool to make it light we lay out the colored design. Then we roll it up, soak it with hot water, and roll it to make the felt tight. Then we open it and dry it. When it is dry we soak it once more and roll it again.

If we roll it for three hours, it will last three years, four hours – four years, five hours – five years.

Kibrya's Mother

Marriage

Engagements may occur early and last many years. Occasionally brothers will agree on engagements of their children *before* the birth of a son or daughter—a real gamble, and poorer families sometimes arrange marriages when the daughters are as young as 12 years. The *ideal* mate is one's first cousin, but in most cases such alliances are simply not possible because not enough first cousins exist to go around. In 1972, only about 20 per cent of such ideal unions existed in Aq Kupruk, although first cousin marriages are much more common among the urban upper classes and the regional power elites.

When parents decide their son or daughter is ready for marriage, they find a go-between, usually a kinsman or kinswoman, to handle the delicate financial negotiations with the girl's family. Among the modern literate families the principles may be consulted or even take part in choosing a mate, but parental authority is still strongest. Once begun, the marriage plans move irrevocably toward a conclusion. If the engaged couple are first cousins, they probably know each other quite well. If not, the betrothed find out about one another as their siblings spy out information.

Film Dialogue

My daughter Kibrya was engaged during Id.

At first I said – no, no, no! I shan't give her away. But her father promised, she was pleased, and the young man insisted and insisted. So finally I said – all right, go!

When a young girl wishes to marry, it is up to herself and her father. They share the decision.

Kibrya's Mother

When the go-between has successfully performed the mission, several ladies of the boy's family go to the girl's house for the ceremony of *labs griftan* (literally "to get—or take—the word, or promise"). The prospective groom's kin-ladies accept tea, sweets, and a special conical sugarloaf (*qand*), varying from 12 inches to two feet in height and six inches or more at the base. The sugarloaf is presented on a tray. An embroidered handkerchief, made by the bride-to-be, is also presented to indicate her acceptance. Both the handkerchief and the sugarloaf play important roles in later ceremonies.*

Within a week, the boy's family returns the tray filled with money. The girl's family may decide the amount of money is too small, and return the tray for more—or even call off the wedding. (Usually the amount has been decided upon previously at the *labs griftan* to prevent possible embarrassment.) Almost immediately

*The description of the various ceremonies related to marriage relate primarily to urban areas. Seldom are the rites so elaborately executed in rural areas.

Afghanistan

4

Women

Film Essay

Faces of Change

AFGHAN WOMEN



THE AFGHANISTAN SERIES FILMS/ESSAYS

1. An Afghan Village: 44 min.
2. Naim and Jabar: 50 min.
3. Wheat Cycle: 16 min.
4. Afghan Women: 17 min.
5. Afghan Nomads: *The Maldar:* 21 min.

The Author:

LOUIS DUPREE, who joined the AUFS in 1959, is an anthropologist who has specialized in the Indo-European language areas of the Middle East and Central Asia. Dr. Dupree, who holds a Ph.D. degree from Harvard was a Fellow, American Council of Learned Societies at Kings College, Cambridge in 1973-74. His published works include *Afghanistan*, a new edition of C. Robertson's *Kafirs of the Hindu Kush*, and *Afghanistan in the Seventies*, eleven monographs and numerous articles and reveiws in such varied publications as *American Anthropologist*, *The Nation*, *The Economist*, *Evergreen Review*, and the *Middle East Journal*.

NANCY HATCH DUPREE, who holds an M.A. degree in Chinese from Columbia University, has lived and worked in Afghanistan since 1964. In addition to writing numerous articles on history and folklore, including an *Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, she has served as a UN expert in world development and as a Ford Foundation consultant on rural areas.

Location: Balkh Province, an area inhabited by Tajik and other Central Asian peoples. 2200 feet altitude; wheat growing and pastoral economy. The town of Aq Kupruk is approximately 320 miles (14 road hours) northwest of Kabul.

Film/Essay Precis: The words of the women and the rhythm of their lives in the seclusion of family compounds suggest both the satisfying and the limiting aspects of a woman's role in a rural Afghan community.

Theme: *Women*. The films and essays in this series examine the economic, political, religious, and educational status of women, their legal and customary rights, and the degree of change in their actual and perceived roles.

Film Link FILM LINK This symbol in the essays indicates direct relationship to a scene or event in the film.

Film Dialogue Denotes direct quotation from the sound track and indicates specific relationship between the film and essay.

Acknowledgement: The AUFS wishes to express it gratitude to the people of Aq Kupruk for their hospitality and cooperation.

I wish to thank my wife, Nancy Hatch Dupree, for her unflagging assistance in the field and in the preparation of all the film essays.

The Afghan Bureau of Consulting Architects and Engineers (ABAD) and its President, N.A. Saberi, were most helpful with maps and drawings, as was Douglas Waugh, the cartographer. I also wish to thank Sultan Hamid for his advice and skill in the printing of many of the photographs.